

EXPLORING GOOD PRACTICES IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN AN OPEN DISTANCE e-LEARNING (ODeL) CONTEXT

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Introduction

The need to improve the quality as well as throughput rate in postgraduate studies, calls for instituting new pedagogy to cater for the complex and diverse terrain in the higher education sector. This calls for a shift in focus towards supervisory practices that are contextually located to produce observable success outcomes in order to improve postgraduate supervision (Blitzer, Albertan, Frick, Grant & Kelly 2014). Universities worldwide and in South Africa in particular are turning towards distance education for postgraduate studies (Masters and Doctoral degrees). With technology mediated teaching and learning making this endeavor possible to all, it is therefore imperative that supervision practices using these media be enhanced and good practices adopted for quality supervision.

The context

The use of e-learning and blended online delivery mostly found in distance learning institutions has been described as a flexible mode to replace one to one consultation in research supervision. This involves the use of a learning environment in which a variety of ICT modalities are combined for program delivery (McCallin & Nayar 2012; Erichsen et al 2014; Andrew 2012). Advantages of using a virtual learning environment include, bridging the gap in distance learning between academic and student and student and peers and thus enhancing supervisor-student engagement in ODeL institutions (Van Rensburg et al 2016, Andrew 2012; Manyike 2017). But this rapidly expanding use of e-learning, and of the blended online delivery mode, is not without challenges as supervisors need to acquire new skills,

while empirical evidence on its impact on the process of postgraduate supervision remains limited. Hence this study seeks to explore good supervision practices within an ODeL context.

The inquiry procedures

An explorative, descriptive and contextual qualitative design using appreciative inquiry was conducted. The inquiry entailed engaging in focus group discussions with twelve (12) academics involved in research supervision of masters and doctoral students in one department of an ODeL institution. The appreciative inquiry model as used in this study seeks to involve the stakeholders in self-determined change through a positive and strength-based collaborative approach. It directs the focus of the research towards a positive stance rather than utilizing a problem-based lens; hence in this study the focus of participants' attention was drawn on what "is possible" instead of what "is wrong" (Konkle 2013, Cooperrider & Whitney 2011, Kessler 2013)

Following ethical approval obtained from the institutional Research Ethics Committee and that of the department where the research was to be conducted, the researcher proceeded with focus group discussions held in the departmental boardroom for the convenience of the academics. The following questions based on three of the 4Ds-cyclic stages of the AI model, were used to guide the discussions:



TAU PARTICIPANT
FOCUS GROUP DISC

The focus group discussions lasted 1½ hours and were audio recorded with the participants' permission. As a form of data triangulation an online survey involving students registered with the selected department is in process, to explore their experiences of being supervised in the selected department of an ODeL institution.

Outcomes

Deliberations in the focus group discussion revealed the following themes in the supervision practices:

1. establishing a structured supportive supervisor-supervisee relationship,
2. creation of an authentic presence in the virtual environment;
3. challenges with the ODeL environment and the need for a peer support mechanism for supervisors within the department

A structured supportive supervisor-supervisee relationship

In this regard academics highlighted the importance of establishing a structure at the outset in the form of a learning contract between the supervisor and the student to guide their interactions;

For successful enactment of the expectations of the contract most academics emphasized on the following as essential to ensures productivity and progress in supervision: - constant communication being the key; adherence to set deadlines; consideration of the affective dimension in the relationship; and fostering collaborative learning among students of the same supervisor

Creation of an authentic presence in the virtual environment

Most academics mentioned the use of online interactive strategies to bridge the distance gap through use of web and mobile devices such as: Whatsapp for instant communication between supervisor and the student and to ensure immediacy in giving feedback on the go; Wikispaces as a repository for learning triggers; Dropbox for immediate and elaborate feedback; and Skype for individual. These technological media were reported to facilitate scaffolding and collaborative learning among students of the same supervisor, and easy blending of the affective dimension in supervision

Challenges within the ODeL environment

Most academics highlighted challenges with adherence to the specified working guidelines and meeting deadlines by both students and supervisors. With the latter this was related to the high ratio of students to a supervisor and their other teaching workload

in the undergraduate program; to language and cultural barriers leading to loss of message meaning and misinterpretation; and subtle institutional pressures of ensuring an increased postgraduate student throughput by supervisors.

The need for a peer support system for supervisors within the department

Recognizing varying strengths in the modalities of supervision within an ODeL, amongst other suggestions, most academics recommended the initiation of an informal peer support group to share research expertise among supervisors. Many proposed various forms such as, among others, the establishment of a community of scholars/reflective supervision group or community of professional learning, whatever name can fit in. This was in line with the ultimate aim set in this project, and continuous deliberation on this matter will take the project forward. A pilot group for the community of scholars is to be set and discussion are in process on the framework to be adopted for the envisaged type of CoP.

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